

Finding a new voice: challenges facing international (and home!) students writing university assignments in the UK

Carol Bailey, Jackie Pieterick
School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences
University of Wolverhampton

Abstract

With the globalisation of education, European universities are accepting increasing numbers of students from outside the EU. Some of these have experienced very different academic cultures from that of their host university, and may face difficulties in adapting to the requirements of their new institution. Even within Europe, academic cultures may vary enormously. One challenge which faces all those studying outside their home country is the task of writing academic essays: often in a foreign language and according to unfamiliar criteria.

This paper draws on students' reflections about the academic writing process in their first year at a UK university, exploring areas where the transition from their previous learning environment presents a challenge. It compares the previous experience of home and international students with respect to length and frequency of written assignments, research and organisation of ideas, language and referencing of sources. What is the best way to support them through the transition, and are we doing enough?

Introduction

When entering university, students confront a multi-faceted task of learning new content, learning new ways of understanding, interpreting and organising the new knowledge and learning new ways of writing about their knowledge (Levin, 2000). According to *Writing Matters: The Royal Literary Fund Report on Student Writing in Higher Education* (2006, p. 23), "[l]arge numbers of contemporary British undergraduates lack the basic ability to express themselves adequately in writing.¹ Many students are simply not ready for the demands that higher education is making—or should be making—of them." The demands the RLF refer to are, ultimately, the demands of writing academically, which include selecting information and ideas relevant to the set topic, identifying a clear focus, making use of written sources and presenting a reasoned argument in a formal way. Needless to say, even students who do not have specific problems with grammar and essay structure can find the complex writing required at university a daunting one.

The task can appear even more daunting for non-native-English-speaking (NNES) international students, who are forced to grapple not only with the strictures of expressing themselves in a foreign language, but with the challenges of an unfamiliar assessment system. Schmitt's (2005) finding that her international students had done very little extended writing at secondary school, even in their first language, is borne out by our commentators:

'In my country we had not got any essays. Just we had test and group presentation.'
(Turkish student)

'For me the academic writing process was something that I was doing for the first time. When I was at school I didn't have to write an essay or composition with more than 500 words. When I came to the university they told that in this module we will write an essay of 1,200 words. When I heard that I was panic because I never did this before.'
(Cypriot student)

At the University of Wolverhampton, as in many other UK universities, tuition in academic writing skills for NNES international students is provided separately from, and additional to,

¹ We would argue that there is nothing remotely "basic" about expressing yourself in writing—let alone doing so "adequately."

parallel support offered for home students. In many cases this is due to considerations of finance (income stream) and internal politics (departmental structure). Perceptions of international students as 'other' and needing specialist, targeted support may also play a role. In this paper we investigate our home and international students' reflections on their development as academic writers during their first year at a UK university. Given the recent acceleration in international student mobility, with a 61% growth of foreign enrolments in the EU between 2000 and 2005 and a 93% growth worldwide (OECD, 2007), we hope that this topic will be as interesting to our colleagues in mainland Europe as it is to us. And because the theme of this conference is Student Voices, we have – as far as space permits – expressed in their own words the views of our Writing for Academic Success and Study Skills Advanced students.

International students' comments were generated from an assignment on the EFL level 0 module Study Skills Advanced² which required them to reflect on the process of writing a 1,200-word discipline-specific essay. Home students' comments were generated from a similar type of reflective activity as part of their self-assessment of a discipline-specific essay they composed in Writing for Academic Success³. Both sets of students had participated in 12 weeks of input/activity and were reflecting back over their experiences of academic writing, and forwards to what they needed to improve in future. It should be borne in mind that the language and content of our students' reflections will have been influenced by what took place in their respective modules.

Thinking about what to say

Researching the essay topic posed similar challenges for both home and international students. In most cases, students had in their previous learning experience been dependent on one or two course books and/or their teacher, so were baffled by the wealth of information available to them as UK university students. While some felt overwhelmed by the physical resources, *'I feel giddy when I entered into the complex learning center system sometimes'* (Chinese student), for others the difficulty lay in locating information online: *'I didn't know how to find information from the internet, I only knew how to use the internet to find lyrics for songs.'* (Cypriot student) and *'I couldn't locate too many journals, so perhaps in future, I will spend more time researching sources.'* (British student)

Having located sources, both sets of students faced the task of selecting those most relevant to their research topic: *'By finding and selecting more suitable and easily relatable sources for the topic'* (British student) and *'I lack insight to differentiate from a large number of information and pick up the useful stuff'* (Chinese student).

When commenting on research, the majority of home students tended to focus on the breadth of their research and reading, while only three students expressed concern over a lack of depth of reading in the subject, *'doing more critical reading.'*⁴ International students expressed a different frustration: understanding complex texts in a foreign language is very time-consuming:

'When I first read it, I noticed this book was deep for me, especially the words. There were lots of words I did not know. I spent 2 hours on reading only 2 sheets...If it was a Chinese book, it will be very easy for me to take notes. Perhaps I can take notes for whole book in 2 hours.' (Chinese student)

² This module is aimed at students whose English level is marginally below the University's language entrance requirement of IELTS 6.0. The 97 students (predominantly Cypriot and Chinese) came from the full range of academic disciplines, with very few being language specialists, and were progressing to degree courses at all levels. Roughly half had experienced a period of higher education in their own country.

³ Writing for Academic Success, a level 1 core option/recommended elective, enrolled 215 students from across the School of Humanities, Language & Social Sciences and from the School of Health.

⁴ This seems to suggest that students equate using information derived from numerous sources with essay writing success, which McWhorter (2000) claims is misguided thinking since breadth of research is no guarantee of a high grade. It may also suggest that first year students tend to be more confident collecting information than constructing their own arguments.

Having commenced their research, students on both modules were asked to draft an outline for the essay they were going to write. There is a significant difference in the tenor of comments by home and international students regarding this task. Home student comments about argument and essay organisation suggest they are aware that texts characterised by an argument structure often open with a claim about a topic and then follow with supporting evidence. In addition, they know a text can have multiple arguments embedded in it, but are not always capable of constructing such texts themselves. Additionally, they recognise the role of thinking critically in the construction of arguments, but struggle with doing this: *'I could involve argument between authors instead of presenting a one-sided argument that backs me up' and 'I should analyze critically rather than personally. I must be more careful in choosing my arguments and the way of developing them.'*

In contrast, international students made no reference to developing an argument, talking simply about 'outline', 'structure' and the marshalling of information into topics and supporting points. On the whole they felt confident and positive about their ability to do this – several said they had never written an outline before but found it 'important', saving time in the drafting process and making their finished essay easier for the reader to understand:

'Through this semester, I changed my style to write essay. Before I took this module, I always write without thinking anything before. So, there was no coherence in my essay and after I finished writing and checked them, I could find so many sentences which not relevant to my main topic. However, after I started to use outline, I could understand more about what I want to say.' (Japanese student)

Only two students mentioned the need for critical/analytical thinking:

'In order to improve my writing skills, I need to learn to plan my essay better before I start writing as well as decide how many words for each paragraph. And I need to write things more critically rather than just give statements.' (Turkish student)

Why were the home students so much more sophisticated in their discussion of essay structure? One important factor here is teacher input. The home students may have been echoing ideas from lessons in which they explored the academic argument and how to structure it. Similarly, language used by the international students reflected that employed by their teachers and course books: 'topic sentence', 'supporting points', 'brainstorm', 'organise', 'plan'. Another reason might be that the home students were writing to argumentative essay titles set by tutors in their academic discipline, while the international students had been helped to devise their own essay titles by EFL tutors not versed in their subjects.

Suggestions that international students lack the ability to analyse/criticise/write 'logically' are contentious, tapping into stereotypes of the foreign (often 'Asian') student as 'other': irrational, limited, passive, reproductive, conservative (Nichols, 2003). It is certainly the case that different cultures have different ways of conducting an argument, and that constructing an essay in Spanish or Chinese, for example, will not be the same as writing for a UK academic audience⁵. However, we would prefer to avoid cultural essentialist notions of discourse, and express the differences between our home and international students' writing in terms of their prior learning experience.

Talking proper

In order successfully to enter a conversation, one must be aware not only of what content is deemed appropriate, but also what kind of language to use. Our students – both international and home – displayed a keen, and at times painful, awareness that academic writing in the UK was different from any kind of writing they had done before, having its own set of rules and requirements.

One requirement is that of syntactical accuracy. Several home students noted that they had problems with run-on sentences, acknowledging that this impacted on the way they made meaning for readers: *'I should work harder on the way I'm writing sentences, some of them*

⁵ See, for example, Houghton and Hoey's (1983) *Linguistics and written discourse: contrastive rhetoric*.

are too long,' and 'I need better variation in sentence structure length and stronger beginnings to sentences. I would create sentence structures that enhance meaning.'

For international students, identifying and avoiding 'mistakes' was the prime concern: *'[re-drafting part was the most difficult part for me because you can't understand what is your mistakes anyway if I knew what was the correct I would not do mistakes'* (Cypriot student). Another concern specific to international students was that of L1 interference: *'most of the time when I write something I always thinking Turkish and it cause of grammar mistakes'* (Cypriot student). Writing in English also took longer than writing in their mother tongue because of the constant need to check their grammar: *'I have to think two times when I write something and this was taking me a lot of time'* (Cypriot student).

Regarding sentence structure, several home students aspired to adding sentence variety to their prose in order to give it life and rhythm. They understood that too many sentences with the same structure and length can grow monotonous for readers, and that varying sentence style and structure can also add emphasis: *'Repeated patterns of sentence structure, which needs improvement and more energy.'* Only one international student identified the need to vary sentence structure: *'I always use a few patterns of sentence in writing. It read very boring or repeated and doesn't look attractive. I d try to use other sentences but the incorrect order between the words will make the reader misunderstand.'*⁶ (Chinese student)

With regard to writing style, both home and international students acknowledged the requirement of a more 'formal' style which was at times difficult – and uncomfortable – to assume:

'I could have used a more academic style. I think it might have still been a bit colloquial.' (British student)

'How to write a good and formal writing to describe what I mean is very difficult. My English is not very good, it leads to sometime I am confused what expression I should use. Under the condition, I also use the spoken English in the essay.' (Chinese student)

While international students commented on the rigidity of UK academic requirements, *'The style is totally different in England in assessment you use strict rules but in Spain you have more freedom to improvise'* (Spanish student), one home student identified a personal difficulty shared by approximately 2% of our student body: *'The style is compromised by the struggle to overcome issues connected with dyslexia.'*

A key aspect of 'proper' or appropriate expression is word choice and vocabulary. Both home and international students felt they struggled to use accurate terminology:

'I would use specific and accurate words, from my branch of study, more often because that would make my essay more credible.' (British student)

'I noticed that I must learn a lot of new words because I used the dictionary many times and that made me feel I was at a disadvantage.' (Cypriot student)

While the Cypriot student felt 'disadvantaged' by his limited vocabulary, primarily because 'academic language ... is no one's mother tongue' (Bordieu and Passeron, 1994, cited in Schmitt, 2005, p. 65), international students may not be as disadvantaged as they think.⁷ Most L1 home students have a poor understanding of how language works (e.g., phonology

⁶ The public version of IELTS writing band descriptors (ielts.org 2005) places the ability to use a range of structures at band 6 and above, so it is perhaps hardly surprising that the international foundation course students, whose levels were between IELTS 5.5 and 6, were less sophisticated in their comments on language than the UK students in this study.

⁷ However, it cannot be denied that NNEs will have a much smaller range of vocabulary than native English speakers – Schmitt posits ranges of 10,000 for NNEs and 40,000 words for NESs as being sufficient for UK HE requirements, with empirical evidence suggesting that the actual range of NNEs is below 5,000 words (2005:64).

and semantics)⁸ and lack an understanding of language levels that block their ability to comprehend text and use written language effectively.⁹ However, both international and home students commented on the need to expand their lexical resource: for example, *'Using different words for words that have the same meaning'* (British student). It is also interesting to note that two international students linked vocabulary range to variety of sentence structure, possibly because an ability to manipulate parts of speech (e.g. transform verb to noun or noun to adjective) is essential in reformulating text.

'In my opinion writing essay is very difficult for international students because we just start to learn English language and we don't have enough vocabulary to make sentences better, changing the form of sentence.' (Cypriot student)

'Moreover, the skill to paraphrase also was very difficult for me because I need to know many synonym words and it was my weakness to change the structure of sentences.' (Chinese student)

Incorporating other voices

One requirement of academic writing in the UK is the need to support ones thesis using the words/ideas/ findings/ pictorial representations of others. For both home and international students, the issue of using sources generated more comments than any other area of concern, indicating that this was a major cause of anxiety for them.

It appears that many of our international students have not encountered academic referencing before, or have encountered it in a very different guise in their home country: *'Back in my country I had never referenced a resource and I didn't know how to do that'* (Albanian high school-leaver), and *'In terms of plagiarism, most of the tutors in Korea are generous. Even though some students copy the content from the internet, they never feel guilty.'* (Korean graduate). Home students are more familiar with the concept of attribution, though not necessarily with the mechanics of referencing. While lecturers tend to assume that these practical issues are key in students' avoidance of plagiarism, comments by our home and international students confirm Errey's (2002) findings that, although the mechanics of citation **were** an issue:

'I need to ensure I have used my sources correctly, and make sure they are more useful to the topic.' (British student)

'I always make some mistakes about reference, such as give a wrong author or give a wrong title, put the italics in wrong place, and etc. It caused a lot of trouble to me. Until now, I still can not find a good way to make it easy.' (Chinese student)

On the whole, though, mechanics were subordinate to the larger concerns of **what** to reference, **when** and **how**.

The issue of **what** to reference centres on the complex (for both home and international students) differentiation between common knowledge and writing which must be acknowledged (Errey 2002; Schmitt 2005; Ha 2006): *'When I was in China, most our information are sharing, you can freely use it. But in UK, I need to quote and give reference when I need to use other people's works'* (Chinese student), and *'Referencing of sources is somewhat unusuall to Korean students because it is very common to share someone's ideas or thoughts together.'* (Korean student)

⁸ See, for example, Lea and Street's 'Student writing in higher education: an academic literacies approach' and Ramsay *et al*'s 'Academic adjustment and learning processes: a comparison of international and local students in first-year university.'

⁹ These are described by Mel Levine (1994) as syntax (sentences), discourse (larger volumes of language), and metalinguistics (reflecting on language and understanding parts of speech/ grammatical rules).

Concerning **when** to use sources, home students were much more aware than their international counterparts that sources should be deployed in relation to the writer's argument: *'With hindsight I would have utilised the sources I had found to a better effect'* and *'Use additional sources to back up my arguments.'* For international students, the key issue was **how** to incorporate the findings and perspectives of other writers into their own text without infringing UK academic writing conventions. More critical than the mechanics of citation was the challenge of expressing another writer's ideas in one's own words:

'In my essay, I have to put some information from other sources; it requests my summary skill should be very good, because English is not my first language, when I face some sentences, I absolutely can not understand it, this cause me worry, also it will takes me many time.' (Chinese student)¹⁰

The dire consequences of failing to do this was recounted by one Chinese student: *'Unfortunately, I forgot to summaries and paraphrase the information that I cited from other writer's article, I even forgot to use the quotation marks. As a result, the essay is plagiarism.'* For both home and international students, then, trying to represent—to understand, incorporate, attribute and control—multiple voices in a single text is problematic (Scolion, et al., 2004, p.173)

Finding my own voice

Given the constraints in terms of content, discourse patterns, lexis and conventions, how do our students (and we as writers of this paper) manage to find a voice in the academic discourse community?

With difficulty.

'In my opinion, academic writing is not easy. It needs do many practices and takes study to develop this skill.' (Chinese student)

'Sometimes, when I was trying to find information on the internet and write my essay here, I felt that my brain went drained from thoughts and ideas. I could stay for hours just looking my pc screen, do not knowing how to proceed.' (Cypriot student)

For many writers—novices and master crafters alike—academic discourse contains a strange degree of depersonalisation, the suppression of the author's person, and therefore it seems artificial. It is, in the words of Bordieu and Passeron, 'no one's mother tongue'. This is reflected in the home students' desire to experiment with register: *'The style of the essay could be a little less formal, but without crossing "the line",'* and *'Need to establish and explore my own individual style of essay writing.'* Such comments about style related to individual voice¹¹ are interesting since some researchers have argued that voice is irrelevant to academic writing and that the importance of voice has been overstated in the professional literature (cf. Helms-Park and Stapleton, 2003; Stapleton, 2002). Comments about personalising their discourse, however, suggest that some first year writers believe voice does play a role in academic writing and may be struggling with the issue of identity construction. For NNES students, this difficulty with voice is compounded by linguistic limitations:

'In the beginning I was thinking a sentence in Greek and then I was trying to translate that in English. After writing a few essays, words started coming to my mind directly in English...I need to enrich my academic vocabulary because this will help me to paraphrase passages as well as to express myself properly.' (Cypriot student)

It is not our intention to promote a deficit model of first year home and international students as academic writers. Rather, we have focused on students' perceptions of the problems they encounter during the writing process because we want to learn how better to support them.

¹⁰ See Keck (2006) for a comparison of L1 and L2 university students' textual borrowing strategies.

¹¹ According to Roz Ivanic (1998) individual voice in writing refers to authorial identity, and Peter Elbow (1981, p. 287) describes it as writing that 'captures the sounds of the individual on the page.'

As writing tutors, we have both witnessed and been encouraged by our students' growth in maturity and confidence as authors during the course of our modules—and afterwards:

'It was incredible when I did an assignment of 1200 words. It was a hard work but I could learn that it is possible if you study a bit everyday.' (Spanish student)

'It's hard to believe I wrote this! I didn't think I was capable of writing an essay at university, but now that I have to look back at it and mark it, I think I did a good job for a first year student. It's not perfect, but I'm confident I'll get better at academic writing in the next three years.' (British student)

Finding an academic voice is not easy. Between us we have a total of 40 years' experience in writing and teaching academic writing, yet in drafting this paper we wrestled with the demands of negotiating a common academic voice, foregrounding the voices of our students while giving space for the voices of published researchers in the field, and observing the style guidelines for the conference proceedings. If we, as experienced 'academics', find the academic writing process difficult, how much more challenging must it be for students new to Higher Education, and especially to those for whom English is a foreign language.

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